

University Academic Excellence and Language Policy: a Case of Russia

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the university academic excellence projects worldwide and tries to explore the higher education institutions experience and trends regarding their language policies within the international landscape and increasing globalisation. The article agrees that English goes as a major medium of instruction at universities that strive for reaching higher positions in world university rankings and takes into account the UNESCO traditions related to language diversity and multilingual education development, as well. The research focuses on language policy issues as language has always been a tool to create, deliver and process knowledge within, across and beyond local and national communities toward the global scale. The study took into account the experience of national academic excellence projects across the world, tried to identify those language challenges that the Russian universities as members of the Russian national academic excellence project are currently facing. The research goal was to map those changes and shifts in the language policies of Russian higher education institutions that could help them boost their academic visibility internationally. The methodology rested on the qualitative analysis of national education programmes, universities' action plans, data on Russian universities strategies and tactics regarding language issues.

KEYWORDS

Higher education, university internationalization, academic excellence, language policy for world class university

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Introduction

Languages have always played a critical role in the international education development (UNESCO, 2003). Today there is a strong trend towards multilingual education (Beacco & Byram, 2003). Nowadays it is commonly accepted today that English is boosting its role as lingua franca in education, apart from other fields of international activities, though there are ongoing disputes within both international and national framework regarding benefits and drawback of English being the major medium of instruction in higher

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education institutions (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). Currently language issues relate to the universities drive towards academic excellence (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

University academic excellence projects have been launched worldwide, including China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Russia, Germany, USA, Canada, Australia, etc. The global practices regarding the issues of building up world-class higher education institutions that encompass innovative research and education universities have revealed that foreign languages on the whole (and English primarily, as well) play a significant role in drafting university action plans to reach academic excellence in education and research, to go up through international rankings, to get wider visibility in international academic community (Wang, Cheng & Nian Cai Liu, 2012).

Nonetheless, *the present research started with the hypothesis* that language policy phenomenon in international education deserve a comprehensive study covering a number of issues, namely university internal stakeholders that are affected by language issues, foreign languages that are used to deliver degree courses, the tools to improve the language skills and the relevant competences for the above groups of internal stakeholders, language skills that differ regarding everyday communication, academic and research activities, choice of languages for the information channels for enhancing the university academic visibility worldwide, university documentation processing in foreign languages, etc.

To shape a general understanding of the current state of affairs in the field the research initial stage covered relevant literature analysis.

Literature review

The language policy issues with regard to boosting universities academic excellence could be viewed from various angles. Thus some scholars forecast that English will become a second language for many global citizens by 2050 (Graddol, 2005). Meanwhile, others underline that vernacular languages should have their say in national education (Garret & Gallego Balsa, 2014) and consider the respective policies as a tool to preserve national identity through education pathways (Bulajeva & Hogan-Brun, 2014). This trend encompasses scholars' arguments for careful leverage of foreign and native language in the curriculum and research activities (Preece, 2009).

From the commercial standpoint international student recruitment brings profit to the universities, but the international student body needs some unified language for instruction and research, and currently it is English that has already got such a role (Bolsman & Miller, 2008).

In terms of human rights and equal access to education, scholars warn that the development of English-taught degree programmes might deepen social divide and reduce access of national student body to the quality education (Guangwei & Jun, 2014).

A number of challenges have been identified regarding quality assurance in education delivered in other then mother tongue languages. First, it should be acknowledged that both domestic and international students turn out to be really interested in multilingual education thought not all of them agree to engage in instruction that is conducted only in a foreign language. Besides, both international and domestic students have different level of foreign language



mastery and therefore the issues regarding the learning group formation arise. Moreover, scholars point out that a tendency to develop English-taught degree programmes limit students' capacity to enhance their professional knowledge due to not sufficient level English for specific purposes mastery (Doğançay-Aktuna, 1998; Benson & Kosonen, 2013; Bulajeva & Hogan-Brun, 2014).

Some scholars stress that the curricula based on English as a medium of instruction might be affected by a number of challenges, including the incongruity of knowledge concepts in mother tongue and English that in turn might lead to lower quality of knowledge processing in a foreign language (Heugh, 2000).

Further it turned out that academic faculty and staff also might vary in terms of their foreign languages skills (Llurda, Cots & Armengol, 2014) that in turn, might lead to difficulties in every day organizational and academic communication (Mortensen, 2014).

The issues mentioned in the above publications laid grounds for the research methodology design.

Research Methodology

The research methodology based on qualitative analysis, comparison (Fedotova & Chigisheva, 2015) and included relevant literature review, the analysis of current language policies within national academic excellence projects in various countries and at international universities, and data on Russian Universities that have been selected for the 5-top-100 Russian academic excellence project.

The research materials included international universities action plans, research publications, academic excellence projects official sites.

The data on the following projects was analysed: China's 985 Project (Project 985, 2004), Japan's Centres of Excellence (The 21st century center of excellence program in Japan, 2002), Korea's Brain Korea 21 (Lee, 2000), Germany's Centres of Excellence (Vogel, 2006), Taiwan's Five Year – 50 Billion Excellence Initiative (Hou, Ince & Chiang, 2013), Russia's 5-100 project (Russia's 5-100 project, 2013), development of centers of excellence in Czech Republic and Slovakia (2014), activities of Russian universities –members of 5-100 project with particular focus on language policy issues (Global Universities Association, 2014-2016).

The research goal was shaped in line with the hypothesis set out in the Introduction section and aimed to compare international and academic excellence projects with regard to language policy issues.

The above goal covered a number of tasks, namely to explore international trends in university language policies, to identify current language policy state of affairs in Russian universities – members of academic excellence project, to map possible shifts in language policy paradigm along with university academic excellence project development, to draft preliminary recommendations regarding the issue under study, as well.

Results and Discussion

Comparative study of international experience in language policy development with a view to fostering university academic excellence revealed

that major universities have had to shift their education, research practices, academic network communication and advertising activities onto English at the expense of their national languages. Mostly this situation is due to the fact that North American and UK Universities top in the international rankings, set the tune in current education standards, devise strategies in research. Besides, as for countries that do not run English as the official state language, this language functions as the internationally accepted tool for communication in education and science. Nevertheless, no particular steps were found in the respective countries' action plans or white papers regarding the language policy for education and research enhancement of national universities.

The Russian universities language policy development regarding the institutional drive to academic excellence can be traced through the relevant materials of the task force "English-based university environment" (Global Universities Association, 2014-2016), that produced over 60 case studies and reports regarding Russian academic excellence project members experience in foreign language related issues. The Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (further RUDN University) has become a member of the project in 2016, though the university has a long standing experience in going internationally as since its start in 1961 the RUDN has been enrolling students from over 150 countries annually.

The empirical study of the publications mentioned above allowed us to identify a number of shifts in the language policy paradigm that members of Russian academic excellence project pursued through their participation in the project.

The changes in language policy paradigm concerned the following components

- Number of working languages at University
- Foreign language policy target audiences
- Language training content and skills
- Areas of university activities conducted in foreign languages

The Russian academic excellence project started in 2014. As for the language issues the universities shaped the general trend to create English-based university environment and formulated objectives of teaching English to two major groups of university inside stakeholders, namely Bachelor, Master, PhD students and academic faculty. The respective measures included individuals' training on programmes for their further sitting at Cambridge exam in *English for Speakers of Other Languages*. The necessary funding was allocated for the courses that engaged both students and teachers. The universities reported figures regarding the number of those who succeeded in passing the exams.

Nevertheless, a number of shifts is on track in 2016 and can be found in the Russian universities reports and case studies (Global Universities Association 2014-2016).

First, universities' policymakers and faculty agree that some subjects or even courses might focus not only on English but might be competitively run in other major world languages (Spanish, French, German as languages which provide prospects for double degree programmes with concrete partner universities).



Second, there are changes regarding the audiences that are supposed to master English or other major foreign languages. In 2016 universities that tend to be internationally oriented go beyond students' and teachers' needs in terms of English skills and enhance their audiences that are subject to language policy issues. The universities face the current importance for campus staff to speak General English fluently as they deal with international students on various purposes, ranging from everyday life and going to emergency healthcare situations. University senior management has emerged as a specific audience that should be trained English (or English plus another foreign language) for conducting educational governance and administrative management in multilingual settings, including Asian, European, North and South American dimensions.

Next, there are some changes regarding the foreign languages learning content and skills. Apart from academic English, special emphasis is laid to English (or other major foreign language) for specific purposes. This subject is viewed by all comprehensive and polytechnic universities (that are Russian academic excellence project members) as a tool to make degree students competent on the international labour market. In other words general English or English for academic purposes is not enough for graduates professional development. Moreover, universities diversify learning tasks and set out the needs for specific training of skills in oral and written academic communication in foreign languages and translation skills, as well. Moreover, prospective tasks cover the bilingual curriculum development and specialists' continuing professional development and professional certification in a foreign language.

Besides, currently universities mention that they have to expand areas that require conducting professional activities in foreign languages in 2016 Russian academic excellence project members go beyond educational settings and expand to research activities. Again, research activities in a foreign language are not limited to academic writing but include individuals' ability to identify a particular research journal house style, to create reference list, to develop persuasive argumentation style, etc. The respective competence goes beyond terminology and academic phrases and covers the individual abilities to think in a foreign language about issues under study, analyse research data, describe research methodology and findings, set out a written discussion thereof in a foreign language, etc.

Other areas that require conducting professional activities in foreign languages have been specified by universities, as well. Among such areas the following fields are mentioned: students' extracurricular activities, events to foster and support students' career development, ongoing cooperation with international employers whose companies are represented on the Russian market and foreign employers' engagement in the instruction and career guidance for students, university advertising and promotion in the global educational networks, university records and document processing management, legal support for university activities within the international environment.

The empirical study of the language issues development at Russian universities that are academic excellence project members has made it possible to produce the following remarks.

The university that tends to go internationally needs to shape a detailed language policy that covers a number of relevant topics.

The university needs to clarify the number of working languages it would like to have in operation and the scope of their use in specified institutional settings. It means that academic freedom might allow particular graduate schools decide on a number of language they provide learning in, and on the subjects that are taught on this or that particular language. These issues depend on the particular degree school academic programmes and partnership projects. Nevertheless, the university needs to specify the number of languages it uses for internal and external communication for concrete areas of the institutional activities. Thus, for instance, the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) enrolls students from Europe, North and South America, Middle east, Asia. It results in the university web-site, advertising materials being produced in Russian, English, French, Spanish, Chinese and Arab languages. Nonetheless, particular documents, i.e. partnership agreements and programmes, current news regarding outstanding events, crucial projects and achievements, etc. might be produced either in two languages (Russian plus any of the languages mentioned above) or in one of above mentioned languages that concern particular subjects engaged in the relevant events, thought Russian and English are most used.

To implement the above tasks, the university needs a house style glossary to be designed and used through advertising information and academic courses delivery. Such a step would allow the university to arrange its own homogenous style for providing information in foreign languages.

Next the university should specify those audiences (apart from students) that engage in internationally focused activities and need to communicate in foreign languages. Each target group needs a list of competences in a foreign language to be defined and tailored training courses to develop the respective skills. Besides, the university recruitment policies regarding both staff and students should specify foreign language requirements for prospective applicants.

The universities in countries where English is not a state language might be recommended to consider the foreign language skills training within the core curriculum. Such a practice exists in Russian universities and those who are academic excellence project members tend to increase the total workload of foreign language course, with English having the priority stand. Special emphasis should be laid on training the foreign language for specific purposes and on drafting courses that would contribute to students' research activities in foreign languages.

The university that tends to go internationally is supposed to promote overall multilingual campus life, including students' extracurricular activities. It seems to be really strange that currently the international trends in higher education do not focus much on peer to peer learning and extracurricular activities with domestic and international students' engagement that could contribute both to subject and language learning.

Conclusion

The research findings and their discussion confirmed the paper initial assumption that internationalization of higher education and institutional drive toward academic excellence requires a comprehensive language policy being drafted by each concrete university in line with the global prospective, national



strategies and local tasks. The development of the university language policy requires a multifaceted and holistic approach. The university language policy should clearly define the body of university internal stakeholders that are supposed to deal with foreign language issues in varied institutional settings (senior management, support staff, tutorship body, academic faculty, campus authorities, students, etc.), and specify their diverse needs and requirements regarding foreign language mastery in terms of content, skills, levels, format and areas of communication in foreign languages.

The university language policy should balance the foreign languages in operation in line with the university goals, concrete departments development tasks. The same concerns university activities beyond instruction and research and cover advertising, external communications with business, industry, community, internal documentation and information processing, and other areas of institutional activities, as well.

Both domestic and international students are subject to university language policy, as well. With regard to university student population the multilingual environment development is a must to foster tolerance through academic and extracurricular activities that are expected to enter the language policy action plan of a contemporary university.

The above aspects trace general trends in the university action plan regarding the multilingual education and research. Further study will focus on university internal stakeholders' opinions regarding the language policy issues and balance between mother tongue and foreign languages in academic and extracurricular settings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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